

Ages and Stages in Montessori

Parents and teachers are the guardians of the future of humanity. As we live our lives in the presence of children, from birth until they become adults, we are constantly teaching by our own behavior. Sometimes we start to think that "education" refers to only the learning of math, language, sciences, and arts, but this is a very narrow view of what we are teaching. We are presenting to our children the meaning of life, the care of the self and of others, patterns of love, forgiveness and understanding, or suspicion and despair.

Thank goodness each child was born with an inner guide and wisdom, and all the tools to use whatever is found in the environment to create a self-fulfilled individual. Because of this, we adults do not have to be perfect. We can create a marvelous environment, learn to observe and interpret our child's behavior to discover his or her needs, and get out of the way!

This is no easy task, but it is possible. When human communities were small, parenting information from friends and family was readily available, and teachers and parents were in close contact. Today all this has changed. Parenting and teaching are possibly the most important and most difficult professions on earth.

One of the most important attitudes in learning to observe is to see each child as a new being each day, forgetting the past and seeing only the potential of greatness. This is also the best way to look at ourselves, parents and teachers, at the beginning of each new day. It is a lot to ask of the adult to provide everything a child needs and we believe that some time should be allotted, perhaps at the beginning of each day, to get mentally prepared for the task by praying, meditating, taking a walk. Then one is better able to take a deep breath and face the day with a feeling of being new and in the present moment. If we can balance ourselves, our other relationships and friendships with other adults and children will be more enjoyable.

We are all parents, grandparents, teachers, and children's advocates because we care about others. No matter how much we try to be perfect, we must learn to be easy on ourselves, to not waste time wishing we "had only known earlier," but must learn to laugh, to pick up the pieces, and to begin again. We hope you continue to learn, to enjoy your roles as parents and teachers, and to share your wisdom and experiences with others.

Age 0 to 6

At this age, children imitate. They literally absorb life around them. We can never be too kind, too respectful, too

wise, to be their role models. When they are not with us, we must have the highest standard of expectation for any adults with whom they spend time.

The 3 to 6 environment is not called a school, but a *Casa dei Bambini*, or House of Children. It is very different from the traditional preschool. In order to create an authentic *Casa dei Bambini*, it is helpful to imagine that you are welcoming adult friends into your own inviting, comfortable, enjoyable home.

Would you have everyone sit on a line and put their hands in their lap and close their mouths? Or would you have specially prepared interesting activities, perhaps some food, and welcome each person with a personal greeting, inviting her to make herself at home? Would you line up chairs and tables, labeling where your guests were to sit? Or would you arrange the home with paintings, comfortable chairs, plants, soft music? If a guest in your home appeared at loose ends, would you tell him to get to work, or would you have a private conversation with him and offer some interesting activity? When your guests were all settled in and having a lovely time, would you interrupt them and tell them to come and sit in a circle because what you have to show them is more important than anything they might be doing? What if your guests were tired or hungry?

In the 3 to 6 class, the *Casa dei Bambini*, each child is welcomed with a "good morning" and a handshake, then looks around and finds something interesting to do. He is treated with respect and not coerced. A Montessori 3 to 6 environment is called a *house of children* because children are free to choose their tasks, ideally both inside and outside in the fresh air. If they are tired or hungry, they have been shown where to rest, or how to serve themselves a snack, cleaning up after themselves.

They are invited, but never required, to carry out certain tasks. The adult observes and strives to meet the child's physical, mental, and emotional needs. Once a child has been attracted to and has begun to concentrate on a bit of work, the adult respects this choice and concentration and does not interrupt.

This is an explanation of a small part of the Montessori philosophy in the school, which, combined with parenting skills, can be adapted to the home, with practice and support. At this age, we give the child, who is voraciously devouring experiences, the basic elements of all future studies—biology, art, geography, geometry, math, music, and language. These are given through individual lessons on the use, by the individual child, of the materials.

Age 6 to 12:

This is a very stable and a more intellectual age. The 6 to 12 children are interested in the ways in which society functions, how it came into being, how people came into contact with others. They want to explore the past and the farthest reaches of the universe with the imagination. They want to see and understand the universe and the development of humanity. These children make incredible advances in intellectual work as they go out into society and learn to function independently inside and outside of school.

Age 12 to 18:

As in the period from 0 to 6, this child is going through periods of rapid growth and emotional changes. Especially in the first three years, he will need more sleep, time to think, contact with nature. This is not the time to pile on intellectual work and risk causing frustration, rudeness, and the desire to escape. This is, in a way, a romantic age and children respond to music literature, poetry, and drama. They can be drawn into an understanding their own developing emotions as they pass from the stage of childhood to that of being an adult.

Age 18 to 24:

If the needs of the person are met in the first eighteen years of life, he will be ready to become an independent adult, both physically and mentally, by age twenty-four. "Arrested development" occurs when a child is not able to fulfill needs at the proper time.

A child who experiences independence - going to the grocery store on his own, finding books in a public library, interacting with people outside the school and family - by the end of the stable age of six to twelve - will have a better chance of experiencing a happy transition from adolescence to adult life: going to college, moving out into the adult world, getting an apartment, and earning a living as an adult.

For Everything There is a Season

It is not good for children when we, parents and teachers, push them into stages for which they are not ready. But neither is it good for us to hold children back when they are ready to operate independently. Every unnecessary help is really a hindrance to development. This is true at any age, from a child who is ready to wean himself from nursing, the young child who wants to pick out her own clothing in the morning, and the teenager who decides to study the electric guitar instead of the viola.

At all ages the favorite quote of Dr. Montessori is appropriate:

Please help me to do it myself.

I had always understood that Madame Montessori dispensed with discipline and I wondered how she managed a room full of children. . . . On sending my little boy of three to spend his mornings in a Montessori school, I found that he quickly became a more disciplined human being. . . . The pedagogical discoveries involved have required genius but the teachers who are to apply them do not require genius. They require only the right sort of training, together with a degree of sympathy and patience, which is by no means unusual. The fundamental idea is simple: that the right discipline consists not in external compulsion, but in habits of mind which lead spontaneously to desirable rather than undesirable activities. What is astonishing is the great success in finding technical methods of embodying this idea in education. For this Madame Montessori deserves the highest praise."

*-- Bertrand Russell
from "ON EDUCATION"*

The primary danger of the television screen lies not so much in the behavior it produces as the behavior it prevents. . . . Turning on the television set can turn off the process that transforms children into adults.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, Cornell University

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